The University of Chicago

THE IDEA OF DECLINE IN LITERATURE AND THE FINE ARTS IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF THE HUMANITIES IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

1934

By
JOHN D. SCHEFFER

Private Edition, Distributed by
THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO LIBRARIES
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

Reprinted from
Modern Philology
Vol. XXXIV, No. 2, November 1936

The University of Chicago

THE IDEA OF DECLINE IN LITERATURE AND THE FINE ARTS IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF THE HUMANITIES IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

1934

By
JOHN D. SCHEFFER

Private Edition, Distributed by
THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO LIBRARIES
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

Reprinted from
Modern Philology
Vol. XXXIV, No. 2, November 1936

R. UNIV.
BIBLIOTHEEK
LEIDEN

THE IDEA OF DECLINE IN LITERATURE AND THE FINE ARTS IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND

JOHN D. SCHEFFER

THE history of the literary quarrel which was waged in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries over the relative excellence of the ancient and the modern cultures has been extensively investigated, especially by the French.[1] In comparison but little systematic attention has been given to a question which was being formulated during the controversy between Ancients and Moderns, and which survived as a subject of critical speculation after the earlier dispute had subsided—the question of progress in literature and the fine arts.

It is a truism that the eighteenth century saw a great increase in the popularity of progressivist ideas. But although the central assumption of progressivist thought in this period—the belief that man's knowledge was continually improving both in accuracy and in extent—gained increasing currency,[2] speculations concerning the historical course of arts and letters were marked by a disposition to deny or to modify strongly the view that the quality of literary and artistic productions had improved in the past and would continue to improve in the future.

Such currency as the doctrine of progress in literature and the fine arts attained in the eighteenth century was largely owing to the connections which could be seen between this and other more popular forms of the theory of progress. Thus in the early decades of the century it was a belief in the progress of religion which led writers such as Sir Richard Blackmore and John Dennis to hope for an improvement

[1] E.g., H. Rigault, *Histoire de la querelle des anciens et des modernes* (Paris, 1856); J. Delvaille, *Essai sur l'histoire de l'idée de progrès jusqu'à la fin du XVIII^e siècle* (Paris, 1910), Book IV, chap. v; H. Gillot, *La querelle des anciens & des modernes en France de la Défense et illustration de la langue française aux Parallèles des anciens et des modernes* (Paris, 1914); J. B. Bury, *The idea of progress; an inquiry into its origin and growth* (London, 1920), chaps. iv–v; R. F. Jones, "The background of the 'Battle of the books,'" *Washington University studies*, VII (humanistic ser., 1920), 97–162.

[2] Some of the relevant texts are to be found in Delvaille, *Essai sur l'histoire de l'idée de progrès*, Book VII, and in Bury, *The idea of progress*, chap. xii.

in modern poetry based upon and comparable to the improvement which Christianity represented over the religions of pagan antiquity.[3] A conviction that "knowledge physical, mathematical, moral, and divine, increases," together with a belief in the unsounded potentialities of man's nature, served as the basis for Edward Young's plea for future progress in composition.[4] John Gordon's citation in 1760 of instances of improvement in eloquence, poetry, and criticism was incidental to his endeavor to "vindicate the ways of God to men" by showing "that there has been a continual *Tendency to the better* in all human affairs."[5] The superior copiousness and refinement of modern humor, James Beattie believed, could be attributed directly to a more extensive knowledge of men and of things which had come to later generations with the process of time.[6] John Aikin, the most positive of the eighteenth-century exponents of the idea of progress in literature, stressed more clearly than any of his predecessors an affinity between progress in letters and progress in knowledge by admitting as progressive only those elements of literature which were manifestly a product of intellect.[7] The ultimate basis for Sir John Hawkins' contention for progress in music[8] was drawn "from the natural course and order of things, which is ever towards perfection, as is seen in other sciences, physics and mathematics, for instance."[9]

To understand more fully why eighteenth-century enunciations of theories of progress in aesthetic pursuits were few and qualified it is necessary to examine the currency of contrary doctrines. In the early

[3] See Blackmore, prefaces to *Prince Arthur* (London, 1695), *A paraphrase on the book of Job* (London, 1700), *Alfred: An epick poem* (London, 1723), and appendix to "An essay on the nature and constitution of epick poetry," in *Essays upon several subjects* (London, 1716); Dennis, *The advancement and reformation of modern poetry* (London, 1701), *passim*. Cf. also Zachary Pearce in *Spectator*, No. 633 (December 15, 1714), for an extension of the theory to oratory.

[4] See *Conjectures on original composition* (1759), ed. E. J. Morley (Manchester, 1918), pp. 9–33.

[5] *A new estimate of manners and principles: being a comparison between ancient and modern times, in the three great articles of knowledge, happiness, and virtue; both with respect to mankind at large, and to this kingdom in particular*, I (Cambridge, 1760), ii, 75–99.

[6] See "An essay on laughter and ludicrous composition," in *Essays* (Edinburgh, 1776).

[7] *Letters from a father to his son, on various topics, relative to literature and the conduct of life*, Vol. I (London, 1793), Letters III and IV, "On attachment to the ancients," and Letter V, "On the pursuit of improvement."

[8] In general the eighteenth-century pronouncements upon the historical course of the fine arts were restricted to comparisons of ancient and modern achievements, and even those writers who recognized the superiority of modern artists in understanding of the principles of perspective, chiaroscuro, or counterpoint did not go so far as to contend for any general theory of progress in the arts.

[9] *A general history of the science and practice of music* (new ed.; London, 1875), I, xxiv.

decades of the century speculations upon the historical course of literature and the fine arts were to a large extent dominated by that disposition of the Enlightenment which Professor Lovejoy has characterized as uniformitarian.[10] And the uniformitarian temper, as Professor Lovejoy has pointed out, tended to foster a negative philosophy of history, since it was held that the immutable truths of "reason" and "nature" were equally apparent to all ages, or even more clearly apparent to early ages uncorrupted by traditions and prejudices.

In the later decades of the century the theory of progress in arts and letters met with opposition from at least two sources—from a cult of the primitive bard[11] and from a widely held view that decline was a necessary or probable consequence of any state of great excellence in artistic pursuits. This last doctrine was to survive to the nineteenth century and there receive the support of such critics as Jeffrey, Hazlitt, Macaulay, De Quincey, and Courthope.[12] But even in the eighteenth century the idea was given a wide dissemination by a series of writers.

For the eighteenth century the belief that any polite art which has been brought to a high degree of excellence must normally undergo a subsequent decline was, in point of time if not in point of currency, an old idea. Eighteenth-century authors could find it enunciated in the *Historiae Romanae* of Velleius Paterculus, written about A.D. 30.[13] The observation that a particular art or profession is often cultivated more brilliantly in one epoch than in others, that a number of men of

[10] "The parallel of deism and classicism," *Modern philology*, XXIX (1932), 281–99.

[11] See Lois Whitney, "English primitivistic theories of epic origins," *Modern philology*, XXI (1924), 337–78, and the texts there cited.

[12] See Francis Jeffrey, review of Cromek's *Reliques of Robert Burns* (*Edinburgh review*, January, 1809), in Jeffrey, *Contributions to the Edinburgh review* (2d ed.; London, 1846), II, 144–46; William Hazlitt, "Fragments on art: Why the arts are not progressive?" (*Morning chronicle*, January 11 and 15, 1814), in Hazlitt, *Complete works*, ed. P. P. Howe (London and Toronto, 1930–34), XVIII, 5–7, 7–10, reprinted with variations in the *Round table* as "Why the arts are not progressive?—a fragment," *Works*, IV, 160–64; cf. also *Works*, V, 44–46; XVI, 55–57, 212–13; XVIII, 37–51; Thomas Babington Macaulay, review of *Poetical works of John Dryden* (*Edinburgh review*, January, 1828), in Macaulay, *Critical, historical, and miscellaneous essays* (New York, 1866), I, 325–44; Thomas de Quincey, "Style" (*Blackwood's magazine*, July, September, October, 1840; February, 1841), in *Collected writings*, ed. Masson (London, 1896–97), X, 194–203; William John Courthope, *Life in poetry: law in taste: Two series of lectures delivered in Oxford, 1895–1900* (London and New York, 1901), Part II, Lecture III, "Poetical decadence"; cf. also Courthope, *The liberal movement in English literature* (London, 1885), pp. 24–28, 207–10.

[13] This work survived to the Renaissance in a single corrupt and incomplete manuscript. The manuscript was discovered in the year 1515 by Beatus Rhenanus, who from it brought out the *editio princeps* in 1520 at Basle. Various editions followed. In the early eighteenth century there seems to have been a revival of interest in the history, for one translation, by Thomas Newcomb, appeared in London in 1721, to be followed by a second edition in 1724, and another, by J. Patterson, was offered in Edinburgh in 1722.

similar talents engage in the same pursuit and achieve success in it almost simultaneously, especially interested Velleius. "It seems surprising to me," he remarks, "that the most exalted *Genius's* of every Profession have flourished and exerted themselves within a very short Period of Time one of another."[14] A small number of years only, he points out, were enriched by the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. A single age produced the old comedy of Cratinus, Aristophanes, and Eupolis. Similarly the new comedy was brought to perfection in a very short time by Menander, Philemon, and Diphilus. The era of eminence in philosophy initiated by Socrates did not long survive the death of his successors, Plato and Aristotle. The period in which oratory flourished comprehended only the lifetime of Isocrates, his scholars, and their disciples.[15] A comparable grouping of men of like talents, not only among writers and orators, but also among grammarians, painters, and sculptors, Velleius endeavors to demonstrate, may be observed among the Romans. In attempting to explain this general phenomenon he advances the following conjectures:

When I consider the Causes why the Genius's of this and the preceding Ages, interested themselves entirely in the Promotion of a particular Study; I meet with some Reasons for it, but such as very seldom put an End to my Enquiry. Emulation quickens our Endeavours, sometimes we are spur'd on by Envy, sometimes by a generous Opinion of the Excellence of a Work. 'Tis necessary for us with utmost Application to endeavour to be Excellent, which when we have arriv'd to, we can seldom long maintain, it being evident in Nature, when Things attain their highest Perfection, from the Moment they decay.

As we are incensed to overtake those before us, so when we despair of our Designs, and can neither outdo, nor come up to them, our Vigour languishes with our Hopes; what we cannot conquer, is no longer the End of our Pursuit. We resign the Quest we were upon, and look out for a new One. When we have forsaken that which we can't excell in, we seek for somewhat that may give greater Encouragements to our Endeavours. Thus this changeable Unsteadiness of our Endeavours, becomes the greatest Obstacle to Perfection in any Science.[16]

[14] *The Roman history of C. Velleius Paterculus. In two books. Translated from the Oxford edition, and collated with all the former ones of note. By Thomas Newcomb, M.A.* (2d ed.; London, 1724), Book I, chap. xvi.

[15] *Ibid.*

[16] *The Roman history of C. Velleius Paterculus*, Book I, chap. xvii. The Latin text, ed. F. W. Shipley ("Loeb classical library" [London and New York, 1924]), reads as follows: "Huius ergo recedentis in suum quodque saeculum ingeniorum similitudinis con-

It was essentially this same view of the inevitability of decline in literature and the fine arts, and, in some cases, this same doctrine of the extreme frailty of the spirit of emulation, which was to be taken up, elaborated upon, and given new circulation by various writers of the middle and later eighteenth century.[17]

The currency in the eighteenth century of the idea of unavoidable decline seems to have begun with David Hume's essay, "Of the rise and progress of the arts and sciences" (1742). If Hume was indebted to Velleius Paterculus for the theory of decline which he enunciated in this essay, he neglected to admit that obligation. We know, however, that he had consulted Velleius at least by 1752, since he used that author as a historical source in two of the essays of the volume of *Political discourses* published in that year.[18] And the distinct resemblance of Hume's conception of decay to that of the Latin historian makes the possibility of indebtedness seem not unlikely.

"There is no subject," Hume observes, "in which we must proceed

---

gregantisque se et in studium par et in emolumentum causas cum saepe requiro, numquam reperio, quas esse veras confidam, sed fortasse veri similes, inter quas has maxime. Alit aemulatio ingenia, et nunc invidia, nunc admiratio imitationem accendit, naturaque quod summo studio petitum est, ascendit in summum difficilisque in perfecto mora est, naturaliterque quod procedere non potest, recedit. Et ut primo ad consequendos quos priores ducimus accendimur, ita ubi aut praeteriri aut aequari eos posse desperavimus, studium cum spe senescit, et quod adsequi non potest, sequi desinit et velut occupatam relinquens materiam quaerit novam, praeteritoque eo, in quo eminere non possumus, aliquid, in quo nitamur, conquirimus, sequiturque ut frequens ac mobilis transitus maximum perfecti operis impedimentum sit."

[17] So far as I am aware, the only writer prior to the eighteenth century who made use of Velleius' theory of decay was Roger Ascham. Observing in his *Scholemaster* that the Latin tongue remained pure over a period of scarcely a hundred years, Ascham cited Velleius' remark that Roman eloquence rose to eminence with Cicero and his contemporaries and declined soon afterward, and went on to advance the general position that perfection in the arts must necessarily be succeeded by decay. He explained this fact, however, merely by drawing an analogy with the normal course of nature: "no perfection is durable. Encrease hath a time, & decay likewise, but all perfit ripenesse remaineth but a momēt: as is plainly seen in fruits, plummes and cherries: but more sensibly in flowers, as Roses & such like, and yet as trewlie in all greater matters. For what naturallie, can go no hier, must naturallie yeld & stoupe againe." See *English works*, ed. W. A. Wright ("Cambridge English classics" [Cambridge, 1904]), p. 286. Velleius was quoted by Hakewill, *An apologie or declaration of the power and providence of God in the government of the world. Consisting in an examination and censure of the common errour touching natures perpetuall and universall decay* (3d ed.; Oxford, 1635), Lib. I, cap. ii, sec. 5; Jonson, *Timber: or, discoveries made upon men and matter*, ed. Schelling (Boston, 1892), pp. 4, 11, 21–24; Dryden, *An essay of dramatic poesy*, in *Essays*, ed. W. P. Ker (Oxford, 1900), I, 37, 44; and was alluded to by Temple, "Upon the ancient and modern learning," in *Works* (Edinburgh, 1754), II, 174, but the passages have no relation to his view on decline.

[18] I.e., "Of the balance of trade," *Essays moral, political, and literary*, ed. T. H. Green and T. H. Grose (new ed.; London, 1889), I, 342 n.; and "Of the populousness of ancient nations," *ibid.*, pp. 416, 438 n.

with more caution, than in tracing the history of the arts and sciences. . . . . Those who cultivate the sciences in any state, are always few in number: The passion, which governs them, limited: Their taste and judgment delicate and easily perverted: And their application disturbed with the smallest accident." "Chance, therefore, or secret and unknown causes," he concludes, "must have a great influence on the rise and progress of all the refined arts."[19] Nevertheless, he undertakes to formulate three major principles relative to the rise and progress of arts and sciences, and one principle pertaining to their decline. It is with the last that we are especially concerned.

The axiom concerning the decline of arts and sciences is very concisely stated. Hume advances it as a law "*That when the arts and sciences come to perfection in any state, from that moment they naturally, or rather necessarily decline, and seldom or never revive in that nation, where they formerly flourished.*"[20] The reasons advanced by Hume for the self-destructive operation of high eminence in the arts and sciences are founded upon the discouraging effects of established productions upon the endeavors of new applicants to distinction. He describes these effects as follows:

A man's genius is always, in the beginning of life, as much unknown to himself as to others; and it is only after frequent trials, attended with success, that he dares think himself equal to those undertakings, in which those, who have succeeded, have fixed the admiration of mankind. If his own nation be already possessed of many models of eloquence, he naturally compares his own juvenile exercises with these; and being sensible of the great disproportion, is discouraged from any farther attempts, and never aims at a rivalship with those authors, whom he so much admires. A noble emulation is the source of every excellence. Admiration and modesty naturally extinguish this emulation. And no one is so liable to an excess of admiration and modesty, as a truly great genius.

Next to emulation, the greatest encourager of the noble arts is praise and glory. A writer is animated with new force, when he hears the applauses of the world for his former productions; and, being roused by such a motive, he

[19] "Of the rise and progress of the arts and sciences," *ibid.*, p. 176. Hume does not explain precisely in what sense he uses the term "arts and sciences." The context of his essay, however, indicates that he is speaking primarily of fine arts and letters rather than of the practical arts and sciences.

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 195. For a right understanding of this passage it should be noted that the term "perfection" is apparently used, as frequently during the Enlightenment, to designate not supreme excellence, but merely high excellence. Hume elsewhere employs the word in such a relative sense; thus see the phrase "greatest perfection" in the first paragraph of the essay "Of the populousness of ancient nations."

often reaches a pitch of perfection, which is equally surprizing to himself and to his readers. But when the posts of honour are all occupied, his first attempts are but coldly received by the public; being compared to productions, which are both in themselves more excellent, and have already the advantage of an established reputation.[21]

Were the early productions of Molière and Corneille, formerly so well received, to be offered on the stage for the first time in the present age, he continues, it would discourage the young poets to see the indifference and disdain of the public. "The ignorance of the age alone could have given admission to the *Prince of* TYRE; but it is to that we owe *the Moor:* Had *Every man in his humour* been rejected, we had never seen VOLPONE."[22]

It is perhaps not to the advantage of a nation, Hume speculates, to have the arts imported from its neighbors in too great an excellence, since this extinguishes the spirit of emulation among its youth. "So many models of ITALIAN painting brought into ENGLAND," he points out, "instead of exciting our artists, is the cause of their small progress in that noble art." A similar handicap was experienced by Rome when it received the arts from Greece. Likewise, "That multitude of polite productions in the FRENCH language, dispersed all over GERMANY and the NORTH, hinder these nations from cultivating their own language, and keep them still dependent on their neighbours for those elegant entertainments."[23] The circumstances are somewhat different, however, he specifies, when arts and sciences are transferred from ancient to modern nations. While it is true that the ancients have left us models highly worthy of admiration, these are in languages known only to the learned. Moreover, "the comparison is not so perfect or entire between modern wits, and those who lived in so remote an age." Had Waller written in Rome during the reign of Tiberius, his early works would have suffered from a comparison with the finished odes of Horace. But in modern times the fame of the English poet is not injured by the superiority of the Roman. "We esteemed ourselves sufficiently happy, that our climate and language could produce but a faint copy of so excellent an original."[24]

"In short," Hume concludes, "the arts and sciences, like some

[21] *Ibid.*, pp. 195–96.
[22] *Ibid.*, p. 196.
[23] *Ibid.*
[24] *Ibid.*, pp. 196–97.

plants, require a fresh soil; and however rich the land may be, and however you may recruit it by art or care, it will never, when once exhausted, produce any thing that is perfect or finished in the kind."[25]

Whereas Hume had assumed that a high level of artistic achievement in one generation operates to discourage the endeavors of succeeding generations, James Marriott, writing in 1755, believed that the existence of just models does not so much discourage from further productions as tend to corrupt the quality of these productions. The corruption comes, Marriott conceived, through man's constant pursuit of novelty. "There is perhaps no passion," he asserts, "which more strongly marks the general character of mankind, which operates more forcibly, or actuates more universally, than the desire of NOVELTY."[26] Although this desire works beneficially in the early stages of a civilization, there is a certain point beyond which its operations prove detrimental:

> Not only the improvements of every invention for the convenience and ease of life, but even of those which constitute its real ornament, are owing to this desire of novelty. Yet here too we may grow wanton; and nature seems to have set us bounds, which we cannot pass without running into great absurdities. For the very principle which has contributed to the perfection of the finer arts, may become the cause of their degeneracy and corruption.[27]

This same fear of the excessive pursuit of novelty was shared by other writers, among them Joseph Warton. Warton, writing in the first volume (1756) of his *Essay on the genius and writings of Pope*, was impressed by the obvious fact that cultures had risen and declined in the past, and endeavored to give some explanation of this phenomenon, at least in so far as it concerned literary productions. "History," he remarks, "has recorded five ages of the world, in which the human mind has exerted itself in an extraordinary manner; and in which its productions in literature and the fine arts, have arrived at a perfection not equalled in other periods."[28] The first of these ages, he states, was that of Philip and Alexander, the second that of Ptolemy Philadelphus,

[25] *Ibid.*, p. 197.

[26] *World*, No. 117 (March 27, 1755). The ascription of the essay accepted is that adopted by Alexander Chalmers in his *British essayists*, Vol. XXVI.

[27] *Ibid.*

[28] *An essay on the genius and writings of Pope* (5th ed., corr.; London, 1806), I, 180. This passage and those which appear below are the same, with minor variations, in the first edition.

the third that of Julius Caesar and Augustus, the fourth that of Julius II and Leo X, and the fifth that of Louis XIV, William and Mary, and Queen Anne.[29]

The quality of literary productions in past cultures, Warton's survey of history convinces him, has normally declined when once criticism has become highly developed and the rules of writing have been fully formulated. He states it as an axiom governing the fortunes of belles-lettres that "In no polished nation, after criticism has been much studied, and the rules of writing established, has any very extraordinary work ever appeared."[30] "This has visibly been the case," he specifies, "in Greece, in Rome, and in France, after Aristotle, Horace, and Boileau, had written their ARTS of POETRY." In England likewise, he exclaims, although the rules of the drama have never been better understood than at present, "what UNINTERESTING, though FAULTLESS, tragedies have we lately seen!"[31]

Warton was evidently unwilling, however, to attribute decline in letters solely to the inhibiting effects of the critical spirit. While the restricting influence of established rules was, in his opinion, one possible cause of decay, he also recognized two other possible causes—one "that philosophical, that geometrical, and systematical, spirit so much in vogue," the other, and here his speculations resembled those of Marriott, a tendency toward affectation arising from an attempt to surpass just models. Beyond a statement of these three provisional explanations of decline, however, he did not attempt to carry his thought:

> How to account for the fact here mentioned [the phenomenon of decay in letters], adequately and justly, would be attended with all those difficulties that await discussions relative to the productions of the human mind; and to the delicate and secret causes that influence them. Whether or no, the natural powers be not confined and debilitated by that timidity and caution which is occasioned by a rigid regard to the dictates of art; or whether that philosophical, that geometrical, and systematical, spirit so much in vogue, which has spread itself from the sciences even into polite literature, by consulting only REASON, has not diminished and destroyed SENTIMENT, and made our poets write from and to the HEAD, rather than the HEART; or whether, lastly, when just models, from which the rules have necessarily been drawn,

[29] *Ibid.*, pp. 180–81.

[30] *Ibid.*, p. 198. [31] *Ibid.*

have once appeared, succeeding writers, by vainly and ambitiously striving to surpass those just models, and to shine and surprise, do not become stiff, and forced, and affected in their thoughts and diction.[32]

Both the first and the third of these tentative explanations, however, were to be advanced more confidently by later writers of the century to support theories of decline.

It was essentially the view shared by Marriott and Warton which was advanced by Alexander Gerard in his *Essay on taste* in 1759. "When poetry and eloquence are brought to perfection," Gerard remarks, "the next generation, desiring to excell their predecessors, and unable to reach their end by keeping in the road of truth and nature, are tempted to turn aside into unbeaten tracks of nicety and affectation. The novelty catches and infects the general taste."[33] The source for this position was apparently Voltaire's "Essay on taste," which was included in the volume published by Gerard.[34] Voltaire had developed the same thesis, though at somewhat greater length:

> The taste of a nation may degenerate and become extremely depraved; and it almost always happens that the period of it's perfection is the forerunner of it's decline. Artists through the apprehension of being regarded as mere imitators, strike out into new and uncommon paths, and turn aside from the beautiful simplicity of nature, which their predecessors invariably kept in view.[35]

In such efforts to avoid imitation, he had held, artists display a certain degree of merit; this tends to obscure the defects of their productions. The public, loving novelty, applaud these productions, but their approval is soon followed by disgust. New artists appear, make new efforts to please, and depart still farther from nature. Thus the taste of a people is corrupted. "Overwhelmed with new inventions, which succeed and efface each other with incredible rapidity, they scarcely know where they are, and cast back their eager and anxious desires towards the period, when *true taste* reigned under the empire of nature."[36] But that happy age cannot be recalled. Only a few choice

[32] *Ibid.*, pp. 198–99.

[33] *An essay on taste . . . . with three dissertations on the same subject. By Mr. de Voltaire. Mr. d'Alembert, F.R.S. Mr. de Montesquieu* (London, 1759), p. 130.

[34] This latter essay is a translation of Voltaire's article, "Gout (Gramm. Littérat. & Philos.)," contributed to the *Encyclopédie*, VII (1757), 761.

[35] Voltaire, "An essay on taste," in Gerard, *An essay on taste*, p. 220.

[36] *Ibid.*, pp. 220–21.

spirits continue to cultivate true taste, in their own small circle, "remote from the profane eye of the depraved and capricious multitude."[37]

Samuel Johnson and possibly Oliver Goldsmith must also be numbered with Marriott, Warton, Gerard, and Voltaire among those who believed that the normal course of arts and letters is corrupted in its later stages by an unwarranted pursuit of novelty. "The natural progress of the works of men," Johnson held, "is from rudeness to convenience, from convenience to elegance, and from elegance to nicety."[38] For illustrations of this remark he turned to the history of architecture and languages. In an article in the *Weekly magazine* for January 19, 1760, an anonymous writer, perhaps Goldsmith,[39] observes that "every art when it has attained perfection from the natural instability of human things, necessarily declines towards its former imperfection; the desire of novelty leading us not less to add to what is already complete, than to improve what is yet unfinished."[40]

Quite apart from this article, however, Goldsmith's writings reveal him as an exponent during these same years of the doctrine of decline in arts and letters. "It may be proper," he states in his *Enquiry into the present state of polite learning in Europe* (1759), "to take a slight review of the decline of ancient learning; to consider how far its depravation was owing to the impossibility of supporting continued perfection; in what respects it proceeded from voluntary corruption; and how far it was hastened on by accident."[41] Such a review, he thinks, may afford instruction if it is utilized for a comparison with the course of modern learning: "We shall thus be enabled to perceive what period of antiquity the present age most resembles; whether we are making advances towards excellence, or retiring again to primeval obscurity: we shall thus be taught to acquiesce in those defects which it is impossible to prevent, and reject all faulty innovations, though offered under the specious titles of improvement."[42]

[37] *Ibid.*, p. 221.

[38] *Idler*, No. 63 (June 30, 1759).

[39] See Arthur Friedman, in *Modern philology*, XXXII (1935), 281–99, for the hypothesis of Goldsmith's authorship of this and other articles in the *Weekly magazine*.

[40] "The modern taste in music considered," *Weekly magazine: or, gentleman and lady's polite companion*, No. 4 (January 19, 1760), p. 95.

[41] *Works*, ed. Gibbs (new ed.; London, 1901–8), III, 468. The term "learning," as employed by Goldsmith in the *Enquiry*, is virtually synonymous with "letters."

[42] *Works*, III, 468.

Judging from the foregoing statements, it would appear that Goldsmith regarded the decay of learning as in some measure avertible. This view is supported by his assertion that while learning may be on the decline in France and England, "yet it is still capable of retrieving much of its former splendour."[43] There are other elements, however, in Goldsmith's thought which seem to indicate that he considered decay, however long it might be deferred, as ultimately certain. Thus in Letter LXIII of the *Citizen of the world*, Lien Chi Altangi, remarking that China is imperceptibly degenerating from her former greatness, concludes:

> This decay is surely from nature, and not the result of voluntary degeneracy. In a period of two or three thousand years she seems at proper intervals to produce great minds, with an effort resembling that which introduces the vicissitudes of seasons. They rise up at once, continue for an age, enlighten the world, fall like ripened corn, and mankind again gradually relapse into pristine barbarity. We little ones look around, are amazed at the decline, seek after the causes of this invisible decay, attribute to want of encouragement what really proceeds from want of power, are astonished to find every art and every science in the decline, not considering that autumn is over, and fatigued nature again begins to repose for some succeeding effort.[44]

And in the *Enquiry* Goldsmith speculates upon one possible cause of decline in a passage reminiscent of Hume and Velleius Paterculus:

> As learning advances, the candidates for its honours become more numerous, and the acquisition of fame more uncertain: the modest may despair of attaining it, and the opulent think it too precarious to pursue; thus the task of supporting the honour of the times may at last devolve on indigence and effrontery, while learning must partake of the contempt of its professors.[45]

A more potent menace in his view are those epidemics of criticism and pedantry which, he holds, accompany high excellence in learning. Here his explanation of decline is analogous to the first explanation of Warton. Among the ancients. he observes, neither the satire and contempt of the wise nor the laws framed by the state could check the rise of a legion of critics.[46] In his discussion of the state of learning in

[43] *Ibid.*, p. 491.

[44] *Ibid.*, pp. 238–39.

[45] *Ibid.*, p. 468. An edition of Velleius (Paris, 1754) was among the books left by Goldsmith at his death. See the catalogue issued for the sale of his library which is reprinted by James Prior in his *Life of Oliver Goldsmith, M.B.: From a variety of original sources* (London, 1837), II, 585.

[46] *Works*, III, 472.

France and England he restates the dangers of an increase in critical writings, and reiterates the difficulty of coping successfully with such an increase:

. . . . criticism . . . . may properly be called the natural destroyer of polite learning. We have seen that critics, or those whose only business is to write books upon other books, are always more numerous, as learning is more diffused; and experience has shown, that instead of promoting its interest, which they profess to do, they generally injure it. This decay which criticism produces may be deplored, but can scarcely be remedied, as the man who writes against the critics is obliged to add himself to the number. Other depravations in the republic of letters, such as affectation in some popular writer, leading others into vicious imitation; political struggles in the state; a depravity of morals among the people; ill-directed encouragement, or no encouragement, from the great,—these have been often found to co-operate in the decline of literature; and it has sometimes declined, as in modern Italy, without them; but an increase of criticism has always portended a decay. Of all misfortunes, therefore, in the commonwealth of letters, this of judging from rule, and not from feeling, is the most severe. At such a tribunal no work of original merit can please.[47]

While this emphasis upon the fatal effects of pedantic criticism may be regarded as in some measure a special pleading of the rights of authors against too presumptuous critics, it is evident that Goldsmith's general disposition was to regard polite learning as a very delicate plant subject to various ills and vicissitudes.

The thought of Henry Home, Lord Kames, concerning the history of literature and the fine arts shows a curious blend of progressivist ideas with a skepticism of any long-continued state of great eminence. The assumption that taste reaches its maturity in any nation only by slow degrees appears frequently in his writings. Thus in *Elements of criticism* (1762) we read that "men, originally savage and brutal, acquire not rationality nor delicacy of taste till they be long disciplined in society."[48] And in *Sketches of the history of man* (1774) it is again asserted that taste improves only gradually: "The national progress of morality is slow: the national progress of taste is slower. In proportion as a nation polishes and improves in the arts of peace, taste ripens."[49]

[47] *Ibid.*, p. 510.

[48] *Elements of criticism* (New York, 1838), p.471.

[49] *Sketches of the history of man: considerably enlarged by the last additions and corrections of the author* (Edinburgh, 1788), I, 200.

Naturally, any exponent of a doctrine of the decline of cultures has to admit, at least tacitly, the fact that cultures must first of all rise. But Kames seems to imply at times that taste and the arts are continually progressive, improving from culture to culture. Thus in his discussion of Homer, while admitting that this poet was perhaps the greatest genius that ever existed, still he declares that "it would fall little short of a real miracle" to find in him "such ripeness of judgment and correctness of execution, as in modern writers are the fruits of long experience and progressive improvements, during the course of many centuries."[50] Such an art as sculpture, which involves only a relatively simple imitation, may, he thinks, be brought to excellence in an early period of civilization. This art, however, is an exception.[51]

But while Kames's inclination is to hold that literature and at least the more complex arts of design develop only gradually toward excellence, and can hope to reach their zenith only in a relatively advanced period of civilization, it is vain, in his opinion, to expect that any form of aesthetic pursuit will continue to improve indefinitely, or will remain long in a state of great excellence, once that state has been attained. In general, it may be said, he finds such pursuits susceptible to both external and internal disturbances, especially in the later stages of their development.

One external force that has operated at times in the past to undermine letters and the fine arts is despotism. To this cause is to be attributed the downfall of the arts among the Romans.[52] A more persistent cause of decline is luxury. Kames seems to regard the latter as a virtually inescapable obstacle, not only to long-sustained progress in all human activities, but to the prolonged existence of societies themselves. "In all times," he asserts, "luxury has been the ruin of every state where it prevailed. Nations originally are poor and virtuous. They advance to industry, commerce, and perhaps to conquest and empire. But this state is never permanent: great opulence opens a wide door to indolence, sensuality, corruption, prostitution, perdition."[53] Fear of the consequences of luxury leads him to celebrate a middle point between impoverished barbarism and opulent civilization as more suited for the welfare of human beings than either ex-

[50] *Ibid.*, p. 277.
[51] *Ibid.*, pp. 219–20.
[52] *Ibid.*, pp. 292–93.
[53] *Ibid.*, II, 153–54.

treme. It is among such circumstances, he holds, that taste ripens best:

. . . . taste goes hand in hand with the moral sense in their progress toward maturity; and they ripen equally by the same sort of culture. Want, a barren soil, cramps the growth of both: sensuality, a soil too fat, corrupts both: the middle state, equally distant from dispiriting poverty and luxurious sensuality, is the soil in which both of them flourish.[54]

Of internal forces which tend to undermine excellence in literature and the fine arts Kames distinguishes several. In *Elements of criticism* he asserts a general trend from simplicity to complexity in arts and letters analogous to the trend from barbarism to luxury in societies, and points to symptoms of such complexity in the productions of his own day:

A gradual progress from simplicity to complex forms and profuse ornament, seems to be the fate of all the fine arts: in that progress these arts resemble behavior, which, from original candor and simplicity, has degenerated into artificial refinements. At present, literary productions are crowded with words, epithets, figures: in music, sentiment is neglected for the luxury of harmony, and for difficult movement. . . . .

The same tendency is discovered in the progress of the fine arts among the ancients.[55]

"But what taste," he asks, "is to prevail next? for fashion is a continual flux, and taste must vary with it. After rich and profuse ornaments become familiar, simplicity appears lifeless and insipid; which, would be an unsurmountable obstruction, should any person of genius and taste endeavor to restore ancient simplicity."[56]

In *Sketches of the history of man*, some twelve years later, Kames is less fearful of immediate pernicious effects through an increase in ornament and complex forms of art. Nevertheless, he affirms even more fully than before the operation of causes which eventually produce decline in arts and letters quite irrespective of such external influences as despotism and luxury. Unwarranted innovation is seen as one form of menace to aesthetic pursuits as they approach a high degree of cultivation:

A useful art seldom turns retrograde, because every one has an interest to preserve it in perfection. Fine arts depend on more slender principles than those of utility; and therefore the judgment formed of them is more fluctuat-

[54] *Ibid.*, I, 197. [55] P. 107. [56] *Ibid.*

ing. The variety of form that is admitted into the fine arts by such fluctuation of judgment, excites artists to indulge their love of novelty. Restless man knows no golden mean, but will be attempting innovations without end. Such innovations do well in an art distant from perfection: but they are commonly the cause of degeneration in arts that are in perfection; for an artist ambitious to excel, aims always to be an original, and cannot submit to be an imitator.[57]

Manifestly this view of the fatal effects of novelty or innovation in arts that are approaching perfection is identical with that expressed by Marriott, Warton, Gerard, Voltaire, and Johnson. Kames cites in his support, however, not these authors, but two other sources, Velleius Paterculus and Winckelmann.[58]

Instances of decline caused by innovation, Kames endeavors to show, may be discovered in the history of various arts. "The Ionic," he states, "was the favourite order when architecture was in its height of glory. The Corinthian order came next; which, in attempting greater perfection, has deviated from the true simplicity of nature: and the deviation is still greater in the Composite order."[59] After the period of Augustus, literature degenerated from a like cause: "In attempting still greater perfection, the Roman compositions became a strange jumble of inconsistent parts. . . . ."[60] Similarly music, he seems to consider, has been corrupted in modern times by innovation manifested in a "slight and superficial taste for harmony above melody."[61]

Apart from all the influences mentioned above, however, there is, in Kames's view, "a particular cause that never fails to undermine a fine art in a country where it is brought to perfection." That is "a performance so much superior to all of the kind, as to extinguish emulation."[62] The operation of this principle extends also to the sciences, and "is exemplified in the great Newton, who, having surpassed all the ancients, has not left to his countrymen even the faintest hope of rivalling him; and to that cause is attributed the visible decline of

[57] I, 281–82.

[58] *Ibid.*, p. 282. "This is the plain meaning," he states, "of a florid passage of Velleius Paterculus (Roman history, lib. I). 'Naturaque, quod summo studio petitum est, ascendit in summum; difficilisque in perfecto mora est; naturaliterque, quod procedere non potest, recedit.' Which may pass in a learned language, but will never do in our own tongue. 'The idea,' says Winchleman [*sic*], 'of beauty could not be made more perfect; and those arts that cannot advance farther, become retrograde, by a fatality attending all human things, that if they cannot mount, they must fall down, because stability is not a quality of any created thing.' "

[59] *Ibid.*, pp. 282–83.

[60] *Ibid.*, p. 283.

[61] *Ibid.*, p. 289.

[62] *Ibid.*, p. 299.

mathematical knowledge in Great Britain."[63] The same cause would have destroyed the arts of sculpture and painting among the Greeks, even though that people had remained free; it is likewise probably responsible for the decay of painting in modern Italy.[64]

The decline of any art or science proceeding from this last-mentioned cause, Kames specifies, "is the most rapid where a strict comparison can be instituted between the works of different masters."[65] Because the superiority of Newton above all other mathematicians could be ascertained with precision, the science of mathematics declined rapidly in Great Britain.[66] In Italy a talent for painting was sustained for many years, since though one artist excelled in design, another in color, and another in graceful attitudes, none appeared of such superior genius as to approach perfection in every branch of the art. It was not until that period was reached when each individual excellence had been seized upon by one or another of the masters that painting began to decline. Architecture continued to be cultivated with vigor longer than painting, because "the principles of comparison in the former are less precise than in the latter."[67] When the architect found it impossible to rival his predecessors in an established mode, he turned to a new mode, which, though perhaps less elegant, was supported for a time by novelty.

Such, then, is the theory of decline enunciated by Kames. Arts, letters, and sciences, in this view, rise only gradually toward eminence. But the process of refinement which improves them leads eventually to their decay. As the general taste grows more delicate, it is also more easily perverted. Above all, as models of excellence become superior, the spirit of emulation diminishes. Decline proceeding from the latter cause is especially rapid where the nature of the art or science admits of a close comparison between different productions.

Though Adam Ferguson devoted considerable attention in his *Essay on the history of civil society* (1767) to the subject of decline and corruption in states, he was relatively little concerned with the fortunes of arts and letters. Nevertheless, it is possible to discern in his

[63] *Ibid.*

[64] *Ibid.*, pp. 299–300. In enunciating this general principle Kames again quotes from Velleius' pronouncement on decline, and provides in a footnote a translation of the portion which he uses.

[65] *Ibid.*, p. 301. [66] *Ibid.* [67] *Ibid.*

brief pronouncements upon literature a somewhat modified version of the doctrine of decline.

In the cultivation of the practical arts, Ferguson observes, man's needs, or supposed needs, provide a constant incentive to activity: "No measure of fortune, or degree of skill, is found to diminish the supposed necessities of human life; refinement and plenty foster new desires, while they furnish the means, or practise the methods, to gratify them."[68] The elegant and literary arts, likewise, Ferguson admits, "have their materials which cannot be exhausted, and proceed from desires which cannot be satiated."[69] "But the respect paid to literary merit," he adds, "is fluctuating, and matter of transient fashion." In particular, he finds, after epochs of creative activity, men tend to relax their efforts, and become content to admire and study those works which have already been produced:

> When learned productions accumulate, the acquisition of knowledge occupies the time that might be bestowed on invention. . . . .
>
> After libraries are furnished, and every path of ingenuity is occupied, we are, in proportion to our admiration of what is already done, prepossessed against farther attempts. We become students and admirers, instead of rivals; and substitute the knowledge of books, instead of the inquisitive or animated spirit in which they were written.[70]

That such a transition from creative rivalry to studious admiration represents a decline in Ferguson's estimation is fairly evident. "The object of mere learning," he asserts, "is attained with moderate or inferior talents, and the growing list of pretenders diminishes the lustre of the few who are eminent. When we only mean to learn what others have taught, it is probable that even our knowledge will be less than that of our masters."[71]

Robert Cullen, writing in the *Lounger*,[72] No. 73 (June 24, 1786), was especially concerned with explaining the decline of sculpture since the time of the ancient Greeks. In music and painting, he considers, the moderns have excelled the achievements of Greece. In poetry he believes it must be allowed that "the Roman poets, as well as those of modern times, approach so near the Grecian models, as to suffer very

[68] *An essay on the history of civil society* (8th ed.; Philadelphia, 1819), p. 390.

[69] *Ibid.* [70] *Ibid.*, pp. 390–91. [71] *Ibid.*

[72] The ascription of the essay accepted is that adopted by Alexander Chalmers in his *British essayists*, Vol. XXXVII.

little from the comparison." "But in Sculpture," he asserts, "the Greeks stand confessedly unrivalled, as having attained the summit of perfection." Several factors, he points out, combined to foster the rapid progress of sculpture among the Greeks, and enabled that people to bring the art to a high level of excellence while other arts remained less fully developed.

But, one may ask, though sculpture was brought to perfection in Greece, have not later ages succeeded in at least equaling the early productions? Cullen does not think so. On the contrary, he finds that the art has continuously declined since antiquity. It is not difficult, he thinks, to explain this deterioration. The incentive to excel in sculpture, so his explanation runs, has been removed by the surpassing accomplishments of the Greeks. Thus, at the time of the revival of learning in Europe, artists cultivated painting, where renown was still to be gained, and neglected sculpture, where no further glory was to be attained. In advancing this position Cullen enunciates very clearly the doctrine of the inevitable decay of arts:

> When any art has received a very high, or perhaps its utmost degree of perfection, this circumstance of itself necessarily destroys that noble emulation which alone can stimulate to excellence. Conscious of being unable to surpass the great models which he sees, the artist is discouraged from making attempts. The posts of honour are already occupied; superior praise and glory are not to be reached; and the ardour of the artist is checked by perceiving that he cannot exceed, and that after all his efforts he will not be able perhaps to equal the productions of those masters who have already the advantage of an established reputation.
>
> It is for these reasons, as has been justly observed, that when the arts and sciences come to perfection in any state, they from that moment naturally and necessarily decline. . . . .[73]

The general law of decline thus stated is made even more precise by certain amplifications which Cullen advances. If this law holds true, he declares, "then surely the more perfect degree of excellence any art has attained, the more certain must be its after-decay." It is possible, he believes, to carry this train of observation somewhat farther, and

[73] By whom it has been justly observed Cullen does not specify. Certain of the expressions which he uses, however, it will be noticed, point directly to Hume as a source. Thus, cf. "noble emulation"; "when the posts of honour are all occupied"; "have already the advantage of an established reputation"; and especially "*when the arts and sciences come to perfection in any state, from that moment they naturally, or rather necessarily decline,*" which occur in the essay "Of the rise and progress of the arts and sciences" (see pp. 160–61 above).

affirm that "if the art has arrived at the highest degree of perfection of which it is capable in any age, or in any situation, that art will not only naturally decline amongst the people where it so flourished, but that this circumstance will prevent its ever being again brought to any considerable pitch of improvement amongst any other people, while the first perfect models remain." The last principle, however, he conceives, is the more operative in proportion as the art is more simple. He develops a distinction between poetry and sculpture in this respect, observing that "the difference of language, the infinite choice of subjects, and the variety of powers which poetry can employ, prevent the eminence of a poet in one country from having much effect in damping the efforts of the poets in another." In the case of sculpture, however, the matter is distinctly otherwise: "No diversity of subjects, no variety of powers to exert, no difference in the mode of expressing his conceptions, fall to the share of a Statuary."

In general, however, it will be recognized, Cullen added little, if anything, new to the theory which we have been tracing. His essay appears to be, essentially, an elaboration of Hume's observations upon decline. Its importance lies chiefly in the evidence which it affords of the currency of the idea of inevitable decay during the later part of the eighteenth century.

The theory that arts and letters necessarily decline after they have reached any high state of eminence was stated by Joseph Priestley two years later as a familiar doctrine requiring but little elaboration. "An historian will . . . . observe," he states in his *Lectures on history, and general policy* (1788), "that when *arts* have arrived at a considerable degree of perfection in any place, they have generally begun from that period to decline; one reason of which may be, that when the general esteem is engaged, there is little room for emulation."[74] "The paintings of Italy," he points out in illustration of this observation, "left no room for the ambition of England. The same was nearly the case with Rome with respect to Greece; and the finished productions of the French language long prevented the German nation from attending to the cultivation of their own."[75]

[74] *Lectures on history, and general policy; to which is prefixed, an Essay on the course of liberal education for civil and active life* (London, 1793), II, 214.

[75] *Ibid.* The instances of decline cited by Priestley, it will be noticed, are the same as those advanced by Hume.

It is possible, Priestley conceives, to make a clear distinction between the historical course of arts and the historical course of science. "Though the *arts*, as music, painting, and poetry," he asserts, "have perceivable limits, beyond which it is almost impossible to advance, this is far from being the case with *science*, of which the human faculties cannot conceive the possibility of any bounds."[76] "The discoveries of Newton in natural philosophy," he states, "so far from discouraging other philosophers, only serve as an incentive to them in their search after new discoveries."[77] Moreover, the phenomenon of recurrent decline in arts and letters need not be greatly deplored: "And admitting that the reputation of Pope, and a few others, should check the ambition of succeeding poets, it is only after such a quantity of valuable poems have been produced, that more are hardly desirable."[78]

The explanation of decline offered by Archibald Alison was a somewhat detailed restatement of the doctrine of unwarranted innovation. Artistic productions, Alison explains in his essay "On the sublimity and beauty of the material world" (1790), are in some cases beautiful from being expressive of design, that is, of the skill and taste of the artist, and in others from being expressive of character, or the interesting and affecting qualities of the subject itself.[79] In all the arts which have for their object the production of beautiful forms, he continues, it may be considered a fundamental principle that the expression of design should be subordinated to the expression of character. Unfortunately, however, these arts have been governed by the contrary principle, and character has been made subject to design. To this subversion of values, he believes, may be attributed "that decline and degeneracy which has uniformly marked the history of the fine arts, after they have arrived at a certain period of perfection."[80]

To the generality of mankind the test of excellence in beautiful forms is character. To the artist, however, the test of excellence is skill, "the production of something new in point of design, or difficult

[76] *Ibid.*, p. 215.

[77] *Ibid.*

[78] *Ibid.*

[79] *Essay on beauty, by Francis, Lord Jeffrey; and Essays on the nature and principles of taste. By Archibald Alison, LL.D.* (reprint of 5th ed.; London, n.d.), pp. 219–20.

[80] *Ibid.*, p. 220.

in point of execution."[81] When, therefore, the arts have attained that stage of their progress in which excellence can no longer be exhibited merely by the expression of character, the artist is normally led "to signalize his works by the fertility of his invention, or the dexterity of his execution; and thus gradually to forget the end of his art, in his attention to display his superiority in the art itself."[82] While the artist is thus deviating from the true standards of composition, the public, gratified by novelty, and moved by the uncertainty of principles of judgment in the fine arts to submit to the guidance of those who are themselves practicing the arts, are also misled, and assume that what is new is likewise beautiful.

> By these means [Alison recapitulates]; by the preference which artists are so naturally disposed to give to the expression of design, above the expression of character; by the nature of these arts themselves, which afford no permanent principle of judging; and by the disposition of men in general to submit their opinions to the opinions of those who have the strongest propensity and the greatest interest in their corruption, have the arts of taste, in every country, after a certain period of perfection, degenerated into the mere expressions of the skill and execution of the artist, and gradually sunk into a state of barbarity, almost as great as that from which they at first arose. "Alit aemulatio ingenia," (says Velleius Paterculus, in speaking of the same subject). . . . .[83]

After quoting Velleius at length in support of his position, Alison adds that the causes which he has distinguished extend to every one of those arts which are concerned with the production of beauty. "They who are acquainted with the history of the fine arts of antiquity," he believes, "will recollect, that the history of statuary, of painting, of music, of poetry, and of prose composition, have been alike distinguished, in their later periods, by the same gradual desertion of the end of the art, for the display of the art itself."[84]

Concerning the question whether the arts of modern Europe must inevitably undergo a similar decline Alison wavers. "For an error, which so immediately arises from the nature, and from the practice of these arts themselves," he admits, "it is difficult, perhaps impossible, to find a remedy."[85] Nevertheless he alludes to certain circumstances

[81] *Ibid.*

[82] *Ibid.* [83] *Ibid.*, p. 221. [84] *Ibid.*, pp. 221–22. [85] *Ibid.*, p. 222.

in the present state of Europe which may operate at least to check such decay:

. . . . whether the beautiful models of antiquity in every art, may not serve to fix in some degree the standard of taste in these arts; whether the progress of philosophy and criticism may not tend to introduce greater stability, as well as greater delicacy of taste; and whether the general diffusion of science, by increasing in so great a proportion the number of judges, may not rescue these arts from the sole dominion of the artists, and thus establish more just and philosophical principles of decision, it is far beyond the limits of these essays to inquire.[86]

The historical philosophy of arts and letters advanced by these writers is both clear and reasonably homogeneous in its major assumptions. The theory to which they subscribed is not merely the primitivistic doctrine that among any people imagination early reaches a maturity beyond which it cannot advance, and from which it must necessarily decline under the chilling influence of developing reason. It is not the idea that the history of man's culture has been characterized by vicissitude, or by alternating cycles of barbarity and refinement. It is rather the view that any aesthetic activity which has attained a high degree of excellence will normally undergo a subsequent decline. All these writers agree that literature and the fine arts, however long a course of improvement they may undergo, become susceptible in the later stages of their development to forces of decay, and that these forces tend to prove fatal to further creative efforts. It is only with reference to the way in which decay manifests itself that they show any marked divergence of opinion. Here, however, several trends of doctrine are discernible. Thus Hume attributes the phenomenon of decline wholly to the discouraging effects of seemingly unsurpassable models upon the endeavors of new candidates for fame. Marriott, on the other hand, ascribes it to the unwarranted pursuit of novelty. Warton, in turn, advances three tentative explanations of decay—the inhibiting effects of criticism and rules, the chilling operation of the scientific spirit manifesting itself in letters, and the corrupting influence of affectation arising from the attempt to excel by novelty. The third of these doctrines, closely related as it is to Marri-

[86] *Ibid.*

ott's view, is restated by Gerard and Johnson, while Goldsmith tends to emphasize the first, and holds that criticism is chiefly responsible for decline in literature. Kames believes that both the corruption arising through novelty and affectation and the discouragement occasioned by pre-eminent models operate to undermine arts and letters, and in addition speculates upon various external causes of decline such as despotism and luxury. Ferguson identifies decay with a shift from creative rivalry to studious admiration. Cullen and Priestley give their support to the view previously enunciated by Hume and Kames, and find that the spirit of emulation responsible for productive activity in arts and letters flags as the established models become more difficult to surpass. The latter, it may be noticed, also draws a distinction between the limited possibilities for progress in the arts and the infinite scope for improvement in science. Alison once more associates decline with the pursuit of novelty, and declares that the arts of beauty normally degenerate in the later stages of their progress as artists turn to the expression of their own skill and invention. It was with such varied formulation and development that the idea of decline in literature and the fine arts, militating strongly against the spread of the contrary belief in the continuous progress of arts and letters, descended to the nineteenth century.

AUGUSTANA COLLEGE
SIOUX FALLS, S.D.